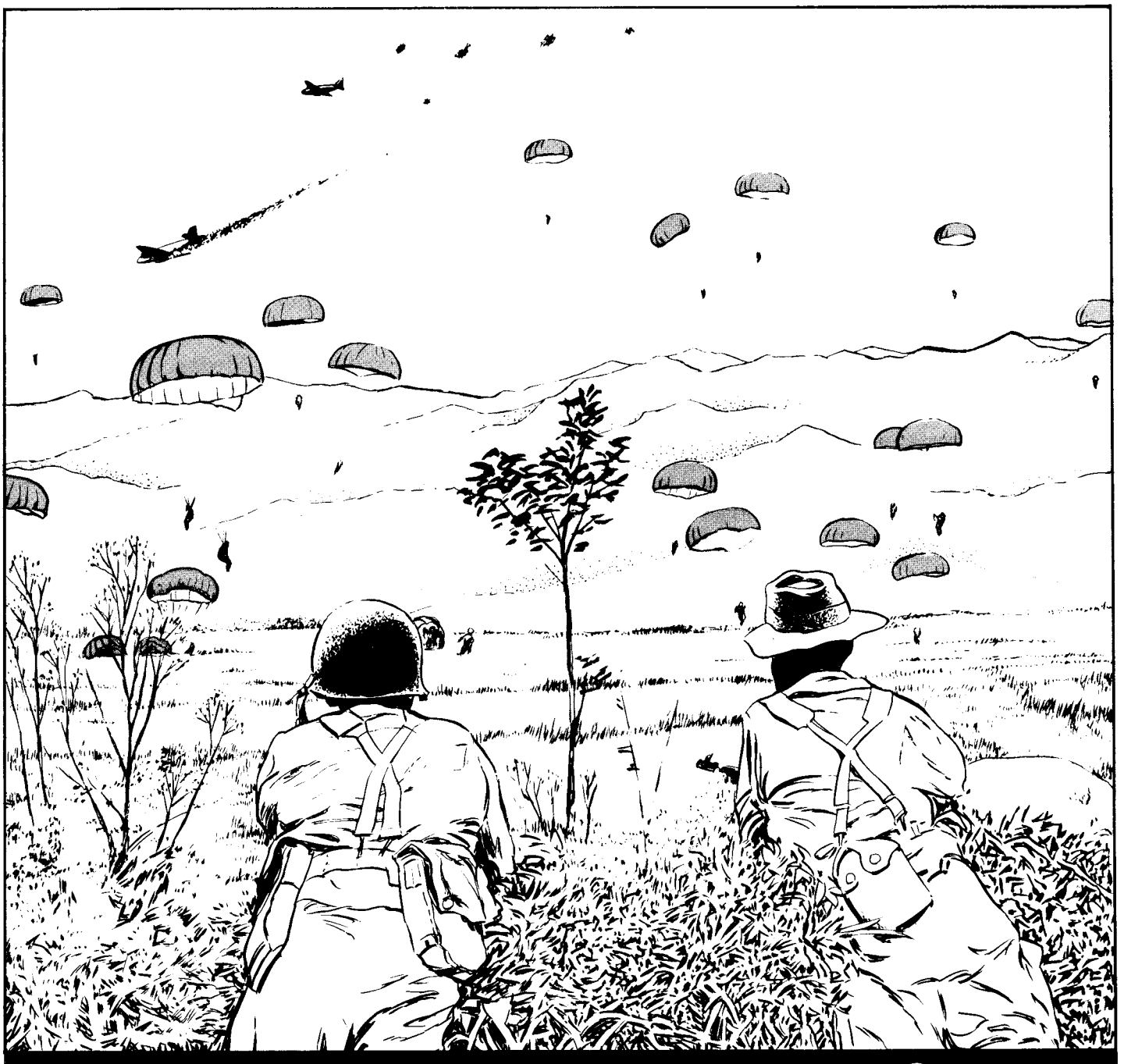


DIEN BIEN PHU 1954:

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

CAPTAIN JAMES R. NAGEL

Dien Bien Phu, a small village in the northwest corner of Vietnam (Map 1), hardly seems like an appropriate site for a decisive 20th century battle. Yet the Viet Minh guerrilla victory over the modern and mobile French Colonial Army shocked the Western world and served as the vortex that eventually drew United States military forces into the war. Many of the important lessons learned by both sides in that battle almost 40 years ago are still relevant today.

The Viet Minh victory came as a result of the massing of superior combat forces, the employment and concentration of artillery, an uninterrupted and innovative logistical system, and the inability of the French Army to supply its Dien Bien

Phu garrison. This was a tremendous infantry battle, with superhuman acts of leadership and valor on each side. In order to understand the battle's significance, it is important to review some historical, political, and economic factors that influenced the military decisions.

By the early 1950s the Western Allies—frustrated by the stalemate in Korea—either overlooked or underestimated the communist guerrilla movement in Southeast Asia, led by General Vo Nguyen Giap. China allowed the Viet Minh to seek refuge within its borders and openly trained and equipped them as well. In fact, the Viet Minh even received large amounts of U.S. arms and equipment that the Chinese had captured during the Korean War.

Increasingly thwarted by an enemy who melted into the jungle and avoided decisive engagement, the French established a garrison at Dien Bien Phu to provoke a Viet Minh attack. They wanted to engage the communists in a set-piece, World War II-style battle. Their strategy was sound, but their tactics, planning, and methods proved inadequate.

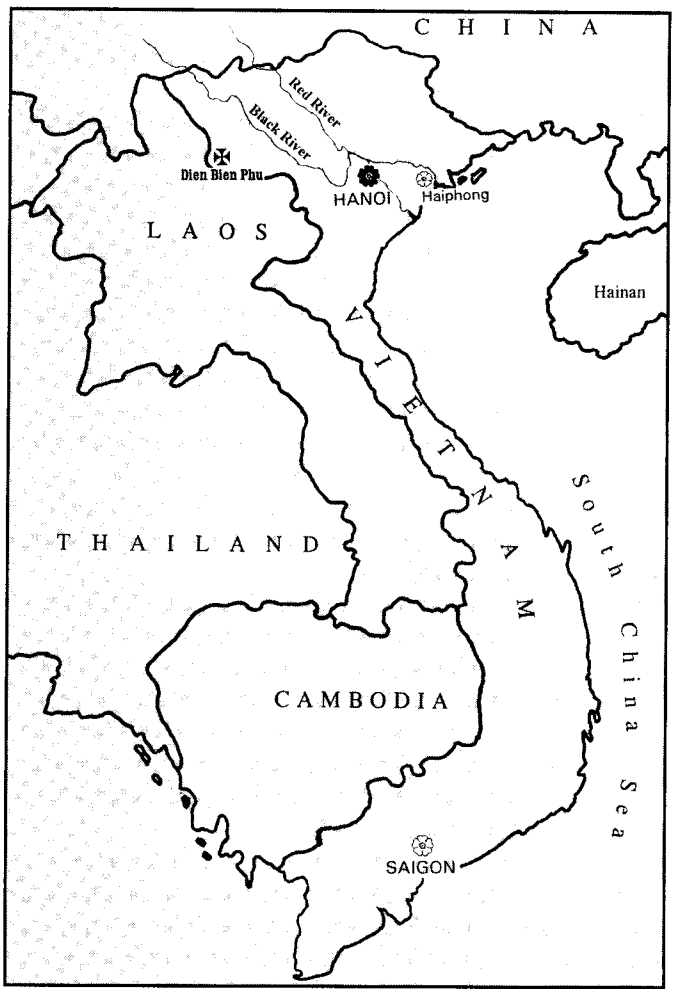
Viet Minh guerrillas had organized in 1944 as a nationalistic movement that initially sought to evict the Japanese. The French and the Viet Minh had fought a series of small skirmishes throughout the late 1940s. Due to the post-World War II economy, France could not afford a military force large enough to oppose the communists in its colony of Vietnam, and as a result of Chinese aid, the Viet Minh guerrillas soon evolved into a full, regular field army equipped with artillery. In an attempt to stop communist guerrillas from infiltration, the French had built a series of forts along the border between Vietnam and China. The manpower required to garrison the forts had been massive, the bulk of it drawn from the local T'ai population and led by a cadre of French officers and noncommissioned officers.

In late 1950 General Giap decided to confront the French directly. By 1 October the Viet Minh had trained 14 battalions of regular infantry and three of artillery and began attacking the French border forts.

The northern forces of the French Indochina Army were stationed near Hanoi, Haiphong, and the Red River Delta area. The border outposts were 300 miles from the nearest main French forces in the Red River Delta region, and by 17 October the 10,000 troops occupying the forts were overrun. The French Colonial Army suffered a tremendous defeat and lost more than 6,000 troops, 13 artillery pieces, 125 mortars, 450 trucks, three armored platoons of equipment, and thousands of machineguns and small arms.

By January 1951 the Viet Minh controlled all the area north of the Red River. General Giap wanted to defeat the French quickly while the United States was still preoccupied with the Korean War and unable to offer them any significant assistance.

Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the French commander in Vietnam since the previous January, attempted a more offensive strategy, and French artillery, air support, and mobile armored combat teams inflicted tremendous losses on the Viet Minh during a series of engagements in the Spring of 1951. Marshal de Lattre was eager to report good news on



Map 1

the war's progress to his military and political leaders in France, because the French Parliament was debating the military budget and public support for the war was eroding; the French government even passed a law restricting the use of army draftees in Indochina.

During 1951 and 1952 the Viet Minh and the French fought a series of seesaw battles in the Red River Delta and the Northwestern Highlands. Viet Minh forces moved farther west into the mountainous areas near the Laotian border. In November 1952 the French High Command planned a deep stab into the Viet Minh rear area along the Red River in an attempt to force them to fight. The operation consisted of more than 30,000 men in an airborne, armored, and naval attack. Due to their excellent intelligence system, however, the Viet Minh learned of the plan and avoided decisive contact. Again, the French force failed to draw the Viet Minh regular units into an open battle where French superiority in firepower, mobility, and air power could be brought to bear.

When the Viet Minh invaded Laos in early 1953, the French High Command again decided to defend a series of border strongpoints whose mission was to contain the bulk of the Viet Minh forces until a Laotian Army could be trained. In October 1953 France signed a treaty of association with Laos that implied mutual defense, and French political and

military leaders felt that abandoning northern Laos might cause other neighboring nations to lose confidence in France's ability to protect them.

Thus, the French government committed its already overextended armed forces to defend the vast area of northern Laos. But the Viet Minh captured this new series of strongpoints one at a time, also destroying several French mobile armored groups in the process. While the French rarely sent their forces off the few existing roads, the Viet Minh moved freely through the jungle and forests. Complete control of the sky by the French Air Force helped in some battles, but the Viet Minh became masters of camouflage. In addition, the communist antiaircraft fire became increasingly accurate because of new equipment and training provided by the Chinese. In 1953 ten of the 450 aircraft in the French Indochina Air Force were shot down and 244 hit, foreshadowing the important role Viet Minh antiaircraft gunners would play at Dien Bien Phu.

After the death of Marshal de Lattre in January 1952, General Raoul Salan, who had assumed command of the French forces, told his civilian superiors in Paris early in 1953 of the importance of Dien Bien Phu. He emphasized the use of the town as an air base and a garrison outpost to block Viet Minh movement into Laos. Salan's ideas continued when his successor, Lieutenant General Henri Navarre, took command of the Indochina theater in May 1953.

Navarre's plan was to establish a series of strongly defended positions in the Viet Minh's rear areas at Na-San, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien Phu, thus causing Giap to split his forces to protect these areas. Navarre was confident that he could destroy the Viet Minh within 18 months and occupy all of Vietnam. He justified the occupation of the Dien Bien Phu area by saying its seizure would place a fortified French position directly in the operational area of a known Viet Minh division; it would control a principal avenue of approach into Laos; and it would destroy supplies of rice that were believed to be vital to the Viet Minh. On 20 November 1953 three French parachute infantry battalions landed in Dien Bien Phu and seized the small village and the surrounding valley floor.

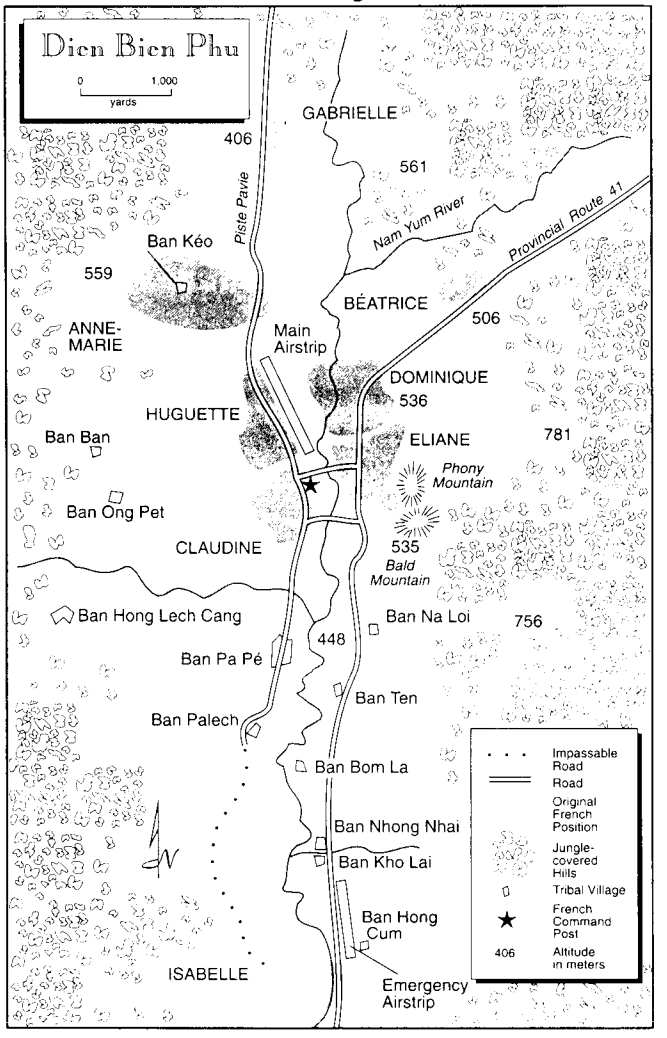
After driving off minor enemy forces, the French repaired the valley's World War II-era airfield and began hundreds of parachute drops and supply plane landings. By 30 November the Dien Bien Phu garrison numbered almost 5,000 men and consisted of five parachute battalions, two 105mm howitzer batteries, two engineer companies, a heavy mortar company, a signal company, and a headquarters detachment.

The sheer size of the valley—18 kilometers long and six to eight kilometers wide—kept the French from occupying the tactically important high ground around it. Given the eight-kilometer radius of the defensive area around the airfield, the outer perimeter measured approximately 31 miles. The French had learned from their previous experience in Indochina that one 700-man infantry battalion could defend a perimeter of no more than 1,500 yards; therefore, they would need 25,500 men to properly defend the Dien Bien Phu perimeter.

Several senior colonels in Indochina turned down command of Dien Bien Phu because they thought the occupation of such a far-flung area would eventually lead to a French defeat. This was the first indication of a difference of opinion among senior French officers in Indochina. Finally, Colonel Christian de Castries, an artillery officer, was chosen and assumed command of the garrison.

De Castries organized the defense of Dien Bien Phu into nine strongpoint areas named Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Beatrice, Dominique, Eliane, Claudine, Francoise, Huguette, and Isabelle. Eight of the defensive areas were around the main airstrip while the ninth, Isabelle, was seven kilometers to the south (Map 2). De Castries now had 10,800 men organized into 11 infantry battalions, two 105mm artillery battalions, one 155mm artillery battery, three 120mm mortar companies, one engineer battalion, one squadron of ten M24 light tanks, 12 combat and reconnaissance aircraft, more than 200 vehicles, and various signal, medical, ordnance, and quartermaster units.

In strongpoint Isabelle, de Castries positioned two infantry battalions, a 105mm battalion, eight 120mm and four 81mm



Map 2. From *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot*, by Howard R. Simpson (Brasseys, 1994; $24.00). Used by permission.

mortars, and a tank platoon. All nine of the positions were virtually on the valley floor, but Isabelle was in a swamp. Between March and August, the Dien Bien Phu valley had received more than 60 inches of rain, the effects of which proved disastrous to the French. The average elevation of French defensive positions was 365 meters, and the two highest strongpoints, Gabrielle (91 meters) and Beatrice (509 meters), prevented the enemy from firing directly on most of the airstrip.

The sheer size of the valley—18 kilometers long and six to eight kilometers wide—kept the French from occupying the tactically important surrounding high ground. To properly defend the outer perimeter of approximately 30 miles, they would need more than 25,000 men.

The Viet Minh occupied the ridge lines without a fight and held a continuous hill line (average elevation 1,100 meters) only 5,500 meters from the center of the main French defensive positions and an even closer hill (550 meters elevation) just 2,500 meters from the garrison's center. The failure of the French to occupy and fortify this key terrain later proved disastrous.

By the time the French had occupied the valley and decided that Dien Bien Phu would require extensive fortifications to resist the anticipated communist attacks, they had already lost valuable transportation time for moving construction materials.

In December 1953 the senior engineer officer informed Colonel de Castries that fortifying the positions to withstand 105mm howitzer bombardments would require 36,000 tons of construction material. Since the Viet Minh completely surrounded the garrison in late December, the only way to bring this material in was by aircraft. Unfortunately, the French did not have either the time or the number of aircraft needed to fly anywhere near that amount of materials. Worse, General Rene Cogny, the Northern Vietnam area commander, did not think reinforced fortifications were necessary.

As a result of the conflicting missions, logistical problems, rain-soaked ground, and higher headquarters' disregard of the tactical situation and the available intelligence, the Dien Bien Phu garrison would face the impending communist attack without even the basic fortifications.

Meanwhile, General Giap had developed his own plan to control all of Vietnam; his intent was to cause the French to disperse their forces throughout Vietnam. Once they had done this, Giap conducted guerrilla attacks that caused the French to position their forces in isolated frontier garrisons, overextending their already strained line of communication. Fully one-third of the French combat forces in Indochina were dispersed and committed to guarding bridges, dikes, and telephone lines, and rebuilding roads.

General Navarre's High Command issued the Dien Bien Phu garrison the following missions: It was to use "at least half" of its soldiers to conduct counter-reconnaissance operations to prevent the enemy from laying a siege ring around the valley; serve as a link-up base for French-led special operations teams operating in Northern Vietnam; fortify the defensive positions; and hold Dien Bien Phu "at all costs."

Although Colonel de Castries obeyed this directive to the letter, with half of the combat units out on patrolling operations in the jungle and without construction materials, the defensive fortifications were soon little more than rain-soaked foxholes. General Giap now saw the chance to decisively engage the French on his own terms. Knowing that Dien Bien Phu was too far away from other French positions for quick reinforcement or supply. he moved three infantry divisions and one artillery division to northern Vietnam.

Meanwhile, French combat losses from actions around Dien Bien Phu had amounted to one full infantry battalion and enough officers and NCOs to staff two more battalions. Although this enemy contact meant that the Viet Minh were coming closer and in greater numbers around the valley, the French remained confident. On 31 January 1954 the airstrip came under enemy howitzer fire for the first time, and pilots identified the first communist antiaircraft positions a few days later. By 17 February Dien Bien Phu was ordered to limit its offensive operations to "light reconnaissance raids." Thus, one of the initial justifications for garrisoning the area—to provide a base for large offensive attacks in the enemy's rear—had been canceled after only three months. French intelligence and aerial reconnaissance confirmed that five enemy divisions surrounded the garrison.

By early March General Giap was ready to attack. Almost 50,000 of his best soldiers surrounded the garrison, and artillery pieces dug into the hillsides looked directly down into the French positions. The airstrip was now under constant bombardment. On 14 March the Viet Minh captured strongpoint Beatrice, one of the two highest French positions that prevented direct fire onto the runway. Although three French Bearcat fighter bombers managed to take off, enemy artillery destroyed the nine remaining aircraft. Dien Bien Phu lost all of its local air support after only two major days of battle.

Fortifying the positions to withstand 105mm howitzer bombardments would require 36,000 tons of construction material, and the only way to bring it in was by aircraft. Unfortunately, the French had neither the time nor the aircraft to fly in anywhere near this amount.

Despite enemy antiaircraft fire, a Vietnamese paratroop battalion jumped in to reinforce the garrison. Throughout the battle, the French parachuted in more than 4,000 reinforce-

ments. Some of these personnel had never parachuted before, and some arrived only two days before the garrison's capture. Strongpoint Gabrielle fell on 15 March. French casualties up to this point totaled 1,000 wounded or killed in action, while the Viet Minh had lost an estimated 3,000 to 4,000.

The French commander realized the desperate situation the garrison faced. General Cogny sent General Navarre a secret message saying that a "disaster" at Dien Bien Phu was a distinct probability and requesting that Navarre stop other French operations in Indochina so that Dien Bien Phu could be reinforced. Navarre refused, still believing that Dien Bien Phu was too strong for the Viet Minh to defeat. The senior commander in Indochina, he naively believed that the French Air Force and artillery were strong enough to blunt any communist attacks and that the rugged terrain would prevent the enemy from moving in large amounts of heavy artillery.

At Dien Bien Phu, ammunition stocks, especially artillery shells, dropped to low levels. The Viet Minh moved 37mm antiaircraft guns onto the old French positions of Beatrice and Gabrielle and were able to fire directly into the landing and take-off patterns of resupply planes. Colonel de Castries became indecisive, and Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Langlais, one of the aggressive parachute battalion commanders, assumed *de facto* command. De Castries did not resist his ouster and spent the remainder of the battle in his bunker.

The failure of the French to occupy and fortify this key terrain later proved disastrous.

At the end of March 1954, the second phase of the battle began. General Giap switched from human-wave assaults to siege tactics and ordered thousands of workers to dig elaborate trench systems around the French garrison. Isabelle was sealed off from the main defensive positions. Giap's objective was to encircle the center positions and to place his antiaircraft guns closer to the French supply drop zones at the south end of the airstrip. Giap had numerous copies of French maps and aerial photos that French pilots had attempted to drop to the defenders but that had fallen into Viet Minh lines. These maps showed the complete layout of the French positions, including artillery and heavy weapon positions.

French aircraft increased their drop altitudes to 8,500 feet because of heavy enemy flak, and still more French supply bundles fell into enemy hands. French casualties mounted, and the flooded, underground hospital filled to capacity. Because of the enemy fire covering the airstrip, casualties could not be flown out, reinforcements could not be flown in, and shrinking drop zone areas limited airborne drops. As a result, critical shortages developed in ammunition, medical supplies, and food.

At the end of April, after one month of constant fighting, the Viet Minh seized strongpoint Huguette and half of the airstrip. On 24 April the main French position had 2,900 exhausted infantrymen left, and strongpoint Isabelle had only 1,400, while General Giap still had 35,000 fresh and rested infantry troops at his disposal.

On 1 May 1954 Giap's final assault began. At 1700 hours on 7 May, Colonel de Castries ordered his forces to cease fire, and strongpoint Isabella surrendered at 1900 hours. One day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French government sued for peace in Indochina.

There were three major reasons for the Viet Minh success during the attack on Dien Bien Phu: One of these was their overwhelming numerical superiority, which enabled them to concentrate forces while the French were dispersed throughout Vietnam. The French objective of controlling territory caused them to garrison small outposts throughout the country and prevented the massing of French forces.

When the Viet Minh encircled the large French airbase at Seno in the Fall of 1953, General Navarre quickly reinforced Seno with reserves from the Red River Delta region. Giap infiltrated several regiments into southern Vietnam and attacked, causing the French to rush more troops to these newly contested areas. He sent the 316th Division of the Vietnam People's Army to the politically important Laotian capital city of Luang Prabang, forcing the French to airlift five more battalions for its defense. These actions had set the stage for the final scattering of French forces throughout Indochina. General Giap caused the French to disperse precious reserve units in pursuit of the elusive "single-battle decision."

When the battle for Dien Bien Phu began on 13 March, the Viet Minh could amass 49,500 assault troops and 31,500 support troops while the French garrison had only 13,200 men, of which only 7,000 were front-line combatants. The Viet Minh's seven-to-one ratio in strength grew as the battle progressed: The French could not fly in reinforcements to replace their casualties, while the Viet Minh had thousands of fresh troops coming from training bases in China and northern Vietnam to replace their own casualties. In addition, communist propaganda announcements four days into the battle caused almost the entire 2d and 3d T'ai Light Battalions to desert from the garrison, thus robbing the French of one-fifth of their combat power.

The second reason for the Viet Minh victory was their overwhelming advantage in artillery and its employment. General Navarre thought French air and counter-battery fire would destroy what few guns the Viet Minh could haul into the mountains, but this estimate was based on the artillery strength of a Viet Minh attack two years earlier. Since that time, the Korean War had ended, and the Chinese had significantly equipped and trained the Viet Minh artillery units.

French intelligence estimated that the Viet Minh had 40 to 60 medium howitzers, but Giap actually assembled 240 howitzers capable of firing 350,000 rounds in a sustained bombardment. The French had only 24 105mm and four 155mm howitzers and an assortment of mortars. None of the French

artillery positions were adequately fortified, and the Viet Minh occupying the high ground around the valley could see exactly where each French gun position was.

Thousands of workers dismantled the Viet Minh guns, pulled them up the mountain sides, dug the guns in on the slopes directly facing the French, and them masterfully camouflaged the emplacements. Jungle foliage hid the muzzle flashes and dispersed smoke from the propellant. French fighter-bombers could not spot the gun emplacements, and heavy antiaircraft fire prevented low level observation flying. The rainy season neutralized French napalm, as the wet leaves would not burn.

By 31 March the French lost three 105mm and two 155mm howitzers, 18 120mm mortars, and most of their trained artillery gun crews. By 6 May the French had only eight assorted artillery pieces functioning. The limited French artillery forces could not even provide mutual support within the garrison area. The battalion of 105mm howitzers to the south, at strongpoint Isabelle, were more than seven kilometers away from the main fortress and beyond the range at which they might support the key northern strongpoints. The French artillery commander realized his serious mistakes in positioning his forces and committed suicide early in the battle.

Since 1 February Viet Minh direct artillery fire on the airstrip had rendered Dien Bien Phu's major method of resupply both useless and risky. Viet Minh antiaircraft fire during the battle shot down 48 French planes, destroyed 14 on the ground, and damaged another 167. The final testament to Viet Minh artillery was that 75 percent of the French casualties (more than 8,000 in all) resulted from enemy indirect fire.

The third and greatest reason for the French defeat was their inability to resupply the garrison. Dien Bien Phu was too far from other French forces for any ground reinforcement, and the French Air Force could not interdict Viet Minh supply routes or parachute enough supplies or personnel into the garrison. French air units did not have the number or type of heavy bombers they needed to interdict Viet Minh supply routes. The Viet Minh had a 500-mile logistics trail from the Chinese border, and they used 20,000 workers to hack roads through the jungle over a three-month period. Monsoon weather did not stop communist porters carrying supplies on the ground, but it greatly hindered French fighters and transport aircraft. Laborers and Russian-made two-and-one-half-ton trucks brought 8,286 tons of supplies into the valley, while the more modern French were able to fly in only 6,600 tons.

The 36,000 tons of construction materials for proper defensive positions would have required 12,000 C-47 sorties, which would have taken five months. The lack of construction materials resulted in poor defensive positions that collapsed easily under the water-logged earth and Viet Minh artillery fire. Once the battle began, accurate and intense Viet Minh antiaircraft fire forced French transports to parachute their loads from higher altitudes. Of the 103,000 artillery shells parachuted in, 12,000 landed in Viet Minh hands and were used against the French. From the first day of battle, Dien Bien Phu was short of ammunition. Not only did this shortage prevent French artillery from destroying more enemy troops, it postponed crucial French counterattacks for lack of proper fire support.

The French logistical system was unable to provide replacements to the garrison. By mid-April, General Giap assembled 35,000 infantry troops and 12,000 artillerymen, while Colonel de Castries had fewer than 5,000 combatants. The Viet Minh removed their casualties and immediately brought up replacements, while French had 1,200 seriously wounded men they could not evacuate. Lack of military supplies, poor logistical planning, and too few replacements doomed the French garrison.

Although the 16,300 men lost at Dien Bien Phu represented only four percent of French military strength in Indochina, this was a decisive loss. Only a month after the garrison fell, the French withdrew all their forces into the Hanoi-Haiphong area, and on 21 July 1954 hostilities officially ended.

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There was much finger-pointing within the French military as to who "lost" Dien Bien Phu. The key points brought up by a French investigative commission were: the underestimation of Viet Minh artillery and supply capabilities, the overestimation of French Air Force capabilities to neutralize enemy artillery and interdict supply lines, and the French commanders' overconfidence in the fighting ability of their forces.

General Giap wrote after the battle, *The French Expeditionary Corps was strategically surprised because it did not believe that we would attack—and we attacked; and it was tactically surprised because we had succeeded in solving the problems of concentrating our troops, our artillery, and our supplies.* In this statement, Giap briefly summed up the major reasons why his own guerrilla force was able to defeat the French Colonial Army force at Dien Bien Phu.

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